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## Experiences of undocumented students in schools and at university

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## Experiences of undocumented students in schools and at university

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to document the experiences of undocumented students. Regardless of where a person stands on the immigration issue, he or she still needs to listen to these voices in order to treat people with the dignity they deserve as human beings. This article was inspired by two things. One was a speech given by a former undocumented student at a social justice summit. The other was a literature review by the first author in a paper for her Masters degree in counseling. This literature review formed much of the basis for this article. It captured many of the experiences of undocumented students and these are important for school counselors to learn about.

### Keywords

undocumented students, school experience, university experience

### Author Statement

Gloria Cortez is a student in the Masters program in Guidance and Counseling at CSUSB. Dr John Winslade is an emeritus professor in this program.

### Cover Page Footnote

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## Experiences of undocumented students in schools and at university

The purpose of this article is to document some of the experiences of undocumented students at in schools and at university. It was inspired by a speech given by Estefania Esparza Loera, a former undocumented student, at the Social Justice Summit at California State University San Bernardino on February 17, 2018. It was stimulated further by comments from a literature review completed by a trainee school counselor, Gloria Cortez, whose interest lay in how, as an educational professional, she could be of use to undocumented students. Her hope was to understand undocumented Latino students' unique challenges and their coping strategies in order to create awareness and advocacy for this group of students. Gonzalez (2011) points out that educators play a critical role in shaping the lives of these individuals and in helping them to understand their worth as citizens in society. In the face of adversity these students deserve to be acknowledged for persevering and continuing to pursue their educational goals. As Gloria Cortez, the trainee school counselor, says, "Undocumented students matter and their contributions to our society are many." For such reasons, addressing this topic is essential, because some undocumented students do not talk about their experience, nor do they know how to cope with their unique struggles. Her hope is to build a trusting relationship with undocumented students so that she can better serve them. Although it is a mistake to assume that experiences of all undocumented students are uniform, it is our hope that understanding some persistent themes in these students' lives helps build compassion for their situation. But first, it is necessary to put Gloria Cortez's literature review in context.

### Legislative context

One piece of this context it is necessary to understand is the so-called "Dream Act", an

acronym for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act. This is a piece of congressional legislation that has taken various forms but has never been passed into federal law by Congress. According to the Pew Center, there are estimated to be 11.5 million undocumented immigrants in the United States (Jimenez-Arista & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017), 40% more than at the millennium, although numbers have declined since 2007. There are estimated to be 65,000 immigrant children in the U.S. each year who graduate from U.S. high schools and would be DREAM-eligible (Morales, Herrera & Murry, 2011; Jimenez-Arista & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). However, Jimenez-Arista & Koro-Ljungberg estimate that only 5% to 10% of these students "matriculate into college" (p. 2) and fewer still actually graduate. As a result, "25 percent of undocumented immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64 have either attended college or received a postsecondary education degree, compared to 53 percent of documented immigrants and 62 percent of individuals born in the United States" (Nienhusser, Vega, & Carquin, 2015, p. 31).

The scenario varies in different states of the U.S., however. In California, Governor Jerry Brown signed into law in 2011 two pieces of legislation that together are known as the California Dream Act. This legislation provides for the payment of state-funded aid and scholarships at state universities for undocumented students. This provision added to his earlier signing into law a similar provision for private scholarships. Some other states have pursued a similar pathway to California. According to an article in Education Week, "The law requires that undocumented students meet the same requirements as other students applying for financial aid at state universities but specifies that they only qualify for financial aid after all other legal residents have applied" (Education

Week, 2011, p. 4). Thangasamy and Horan (2016) list eighteen US states that have allowed undocumented students to pay university tuition at the same rate as instate students instead of requiring them to pay out of state tuition rates.

In addition to the Dream Act, there is the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) initiative, an action established in August 2012 by presidential decree rather than an Act of Congress (Homeland Security, 2015). DACA did not offer legal immigration status, but it did offer temporary work permits and relief from the threat of deportation. As a result, students who qualify are sometimes referred to as DACAmented (Nienhusser, Vega, & Carquin, 2015). As Jimenez-Arista & Koro-Ljungberg (2017) note, undocumented students face a series of obstacles throughout their education but especially after they complete high school. They list these obstacles as “difficulties in driving, getting forms of identification, opening bank accounts, applying for jobs, and interacting with the police” (p. 2).

Research by Nienhusser, Vega, and Carquin (2015) also illustrates the difficulty undocumented students face even getting into college. They showed how students received variable help from school and college counselors. Some were encouraging, knowledgeable and helpful, while others were actively discouraging, not very knowledgeable and unhelpful.

### **Discursive themes**

Research into the discourse of DREAM-eligible students has shown several consistent themes. One understandable common theme is that of caution and fear. Hernandez, Hernandez, Gadson, Huftalin, Ortiz, White, and Yocum-Gaffney (2010) refer to the strain of ongoing fear. The authors show an undocumented student “feeling fearful about being deported on simple trips to the store” (p. 70). For another student the fear is associated with “sharing her secret” (p. 74) with a student officer. She discusses this at

length with her family before she decides to go ahead. For another student this fear of trusting others with his undocumented status leads him to be cautious because, “the other person now will have incredible power over him and possibly his family” (p. 77). The same student survived financially by tutoring other students but the fear of being arrested and having his car impounded is present in the back of his mind each time he drives anywhere. Another student cited by Hernandez et al. also mentions her guardedness. She allows other students to think that she is an international student and carefully avoids romantic relationships.

Gonzales and Chavez (2012) also indicate that undocumented students’ status of being “illegal” creates internalized fears, hopelessness, and immobilization. They collected survey data from 805 youth Latinos and 396 non-Latino Whites living in Orange County. Additionally, they conducted interviews with undocumented youth from the so-called 1.5-generation (referring to individuals who immigrated to the United States at an early age and therefore most of their schooling, cultural, and social development occurred in this country). The researchers’ in-depth interviews indicated that adolescence for undocumented students is a period of great stress and anxiety.

Abrego (2006) conducted an ethnographic study in which he explored the experiences of 24 documented and undocumented Latino students in Los Angeles. Participants ranged from 15 to 22 years old and were currently attending or had attended high school. Abrego (2006) explains that both documented and undocumented Latino students are exposed to similar environments during high school. For instance, both groups experienced lack of academic resources and their parents’ inability to provide them with academic support. However, these students’ situation changed upon high school graduation. Abrego says, “Undocumented youth must face the most difficult challenge associated with their status upon high school

graduation when educational expenses make college inaccessible” (p. 220). His findings suggest that undocumented students, at an early age, are forced to become aware of their economic limitations, the rules they live by, and the potential consequences of their legal status. For instance, undocumented students are not eligible for most scholarships, loans, and federal financial aid and, therefore, few can even attend community college. Abrego states, “They are unable to apply for jobs or internships, they do not qualify for social services, and if they choose to leave the country, they risk not being able to re-enter” (p. 224). Undocumented students struggle financially to afford community college and to obtain a menial job. Without college financial aid, their parents cannot help them to afford an education.

Another student cited by Hernandez et al. (2010) mentions feeling ashamed about being undocumented and working so hard to get to college and then running into obstacles such as transport (because she could not get a driver’s license, she did not drive). As her undocumented status began stopping her from getting employed and earning wages befitting her education, she recalled, “I had a really hard time accepting reality, and it kind of got me depressed” (p. 73). In the Gonzalez et al. study one participant recalled that he was excited to attend college and, like many of his friends, was making plans for college. However, because he was not a U.S. citizen he could not receive any federal financial aid to pay for his education. He became frustrated and experienced depression. Gonzalez et al. (2012) commented, “He could not understand how the value of hard work and his accomplishments could suddenly be so meaningless” (p. 262).

Undocumented students experienced issues with their identity, placed their lives on hold, and felt hopeless. Gonzalez et al., (2012) explained that these individuals sometimes learned to live as an “illegal”. For instance, in terms of driving, they avoided

certain areas, such as checkpoints and areas with high levels of police activity. Many drove in fear of being stopped by the police and asked for their driver’s license and/or immigration documents. “Many experienced a sense of hopelessness as they looked ahead to an uncertain future” (Gonzalez et al., 2012, p. 263). In other words, some undocumented students lose hope and stop pursuing their academic goals. Undocumented youth also fear deportation and worry about being unable to sustain their family due to their inability to work legally in this country. Many other undocumented students also experience issues with their identity. Gonzalez et al., (2012) said, “The condition of illegality not only constrains daily life but also can leave an indelible imprint on identity” (p. 266). For instance, they identified themselves as Americans and many of them did not know much about their birth culture. However, they also felt unwelcomed by this country and confused about their identity.

In terms of social and emotional development, Perez, Cortes, Ramos, and Coronado (2010) found that undocumented students experienced a sense of shame and discrimination. They described a participant as feeling ashamed for being undocumented and also alienated, because he was not like everyone else, despite being inculcated with the values and practice that form the cultural expectations of this country. Perez et al. (2010) said, “Jacinto, who has no legal status in the United States, proudly conveys his pride at being raised under the American flag. Nevertheless, he expresses a sense of humiliation and helplessness” (p.39).

Undocumented students also undergo discrimination. Perez et al. (2010) explained that undocumented students are misrepresented in the media as, “immoral criminals” and “social threats”, rather than as contributing members of society. Others perceived them as inferior and they dealt with micro-aggressive behaviors and stereotypes in their everyday life. If they did not experience exclusion from academic institutions, they

might face discrimination from the faculty. Some educators did not hold back their ignorance but expressed their biases and discrimination toward these students (Perez et al., 2010). Some counselors and teachers told these students explicitly or implicitly that they would not make it to higher education and that there was no hope for them.

Moreover, undocumented students struggled with lack of information on how to move forward and how to seek financial support to attend a higher education (Gonzales, 2011). One of Gonzales' participants said, "I didn't know anything about AB540. Maybe if I knew that information I could have gotten a scholarship or something. I don't know if my counselor knew, but they never told me anything" (p. 611). Many faculty and staff members in high schools and higher education are not trained nor informed about how to assist undocumented students with their unique challenges.

If these are the challenges faced by undocumented students, it is also worth noticing their strategies of response to this situation. Perez et al. (2009) found that undocumented Latino students with high levels of personal and environmental protective factors reported higher levels of academic achievement than those undocumented students who showed lower levels of personal and environmental factors. In other words, having personal characteristics that constituted resilience, such as problem-solving skills, autonomy, high positive expectations, and a sense of purpose allowed them to navigate the school and higher education systems and eventually accomplish their academic and personal goals. In particular, supportive parents, teachers, and community allowed undocumented Latino students to face obstacles with determination and to continue achieving their goals. "Relationships with school counselors and teachers [were] particularly important sources of information and guidance" claimed Perez et al. (2009, p. 3.) Parental emotional support,

such as guidance and empathy during stressful situations also helped them to persevere. Perez et al. explained that resilient undocumented students underwent higher levels of hardship, but also, "On the whole, the resilient group seemed to adapt well under adversity as indicated by the high academic achievement levels" (p. 26).

Undocumented Latino students also connect well with other successful students and seek guidance, social, and emotional support from them. Moreover, they formed trusting relationships with teachers and personnel that were more likely to support them with present or future challenges. Gonzales' (2010) life history in-depth interviews in Los Angeles revealed that some students formed positive relationships with school personnel and high-achieving peers, and benefited from these. For instance, one participant said that he had done well in school and was well-liked by his teachers. Therefore, when a staff member in the admission office could not help him with how to apply for financial aid, he went back to his high school and asked for support from his school network. The school staff helped him with financial information and his teachers pooled money to help pay for his first-year tuition at UC San Diego. Close relationships with school and college personnel thus mediated some of the negative effects of academic barriers.

Undocumented Latino students also applied to a few programs that afforded them the opportunity to continue their education. For instance, in California, some undocumented students were also AB540 students. The term "AB540 student" (after the Assembly bill 540, signed into law in 2001) allows some to pay in-state college tuition. The AB130 and AB131 bills also allowed some undocumented students to apply for state funds in California colleges and universities. Some undocumented students qualified for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which protected them from

deportation and, in some states, granted them a work permit and a driver's license.

Siemons, Raymond-Flesch, Auerswald, and Brindis (2017) conducted nine focus groups with 61 DACA eligible Latinos residing in Los Angeles and San Francisco, all of whom had applied to DACA, because of the benefits it offered them. For instance, it provided greater autonomy, a sense of belonging, and access to apply for a work permit and a driver's license. The researchers concluded, "Without the need to hide their status, participants expressed feelings of belonging and normalcy" (p. 546). There was also a positive impact on the relationship these students had with their families through being eligible to work and contribute to living expenses.

Gonzales, Suarez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguinetti (2013) found that Latino undocumented students coped with their limitations through participation in civic engagement and advocacy. One of their participants mobilized to start a dream team club on campus for undocumented students. She said, "There was no club whatsoever that could help students who were undocumented, they felt alone. And now, like that I have helped to create that club, I see the students and they are like happier" (p. 17). The researchers' comment was that it was understandable that meeting others in the same predicament reduced a sense of isolation.

Another theme is represented by Morales, Herrera and Murry (2011) as the "win or lose, I am here today" perspective. This discourse is represented by the following statement:

We are here to succeed and contribute to this country. I didn't ask to come here but I'm here today. I'm glad my family came [and] gave us an opportunity to follow the dream. . . . They always tell me that nobody can take what I have learned . . . my education. So I will keep going until they tell me I cannot go to college anymore (Morales et al., 2010, p. 277)

Hernandez et al. (2010) encountered a similar attitude to the "win or lose, I'm here today" discourse. When they asked one student about her situation in the light of a stringent Arizona law, "She shrugged her shoulders: 'I was coming to the university knowing that the next day I may not be here. I'm prepared if I have to leave'" (p.70). This same student expresses "frustration with the 'people who cry about' the situation."

Another discourse that Morales et al. document is what they call the "choosing to fight" discourse. It results in expressions of resistance and social and political activism. Here is a typical statement representing this discourse:

I am very actively involved with the DREAM Act. I don't see how it could be any other way, after all I am so dependent on it. I can't just leave it up in the air and hope that it comes true. I need to fight for it. And that is what I am doing. (Morales et al. 2010, p. 278).

Hernandez et al. (2010) also point to the advantages over other students of being undocumented. It brings forward a certain toughness in some and puts them in touch with their problem-solving skills. Said one student:

I think I have a unique ability to think outside the box and find a solution. I'm not limited by narrow blinders; I can see other ways to do things. I feel I have . . . well, the ability to survive (Hernandez et al. 2010, p. 71).

However, this student went on to admit that such a position was not for everyone.

Jimenez-Arista & Koro-Ljungberg (2017) analyze the utterances of an undocumented student who is active in resistance. She makes a telling distinction. "I don't have an identity crisis. I have a papers crisis" (p. 12). It is clear that this statement is an effort to shrug

off a deficit logic and replace it with a logic based in resistance. The same student goes on to make the following statement:

There is going to be limitations, there is going to be challenges, but I think for me at least, a lot of those limitations and challenges have re-shaped who I am and have really given me the strength, and given me sort of that little push to say, “Maybe I am not a normal person” (p.12).

What results is a growing political awareness.

And that was what pushed me you know to start organizing and getting very politically involved with the rest of the DREAMers. And that’s when we formed the movement to start pushing for the DREAM Act. And it was a huge part. Even the word DREAMer did not really exist until we were pushing for that and getting our stories out there (p.12).

Political awareness leads further still in this statement.

I really hope that other DREAMers really see that they don’t give up on what they want to do, and if there might not be a way paved for them, maybe they can pave their own way, and maybe there is a different way. Perhaps [DACA] is not everything. We don’t have residency, we don’t have citizenship, but someday we are going to be able to apply [to universities] and pay in-state tuition. For now, we just have to keep fighting (p.13).

The DREAM Act is not without problems, however. Mahatmya and Gring-Pemle (2014), for example, pointed out in their discourse analysis of the language in which it was talked about by both supporters and opponents that its benefits were couched in individualistic rather than in family terms. The Act represents children as innocent but their parents as wrongdoers, potentially

driving a wedge between family members. Mahatmya and Gring-Pemle call for families to be treated as intact units in immigration policy, rather than making it all about individuals and what they might offer to the American society and economy.

Another concept that helps appreciate the plight of undocumented students is Guy Standing’s (2011) concept of precarity. Standing argued that we now live in a world in which a sizeable portion of the population occupies a socio-economic position below that of the working class. He went as far as to call this population a social class in its own right, one that offers people a precarious social position with negligible rights and privileges. Undocumented students, when they are prevented from working, getting a driver’s license or undertaking university study in some states, certainly are candidates for such a description, as are non-unionized part-time workers, the unemployed, voluntary interns, beneficiaries on welfare, and so on.

The research documented in this paper has made it clear that undocumented students in schools and universities are best not treated as a singular population. Their needs and concerns vary greatly. Some students might struggle with lack of academic and financial assistance and others might need more social-emotional support. A compassionate response to these concerns demands that professionals forsake stereotyped responses and seek to understand and consider undocumented students’ unique experiences and coping strategies to better assist them with financial and academic resources. Also, as educators it is important to advocate for undocumented students’ needs, because these students truly want to pursue a higher education and contribute to society.

However, there are currently gaps in the available research that have not yet been addressed. For example, there is not enough research done on how schools and higher education counselors are meeting the needs of undocumented Latino students and their families. Researchers could start examining



the strategies and resources that effective counselors use when working with undocumented students. There is also limited research on the impact DACA has on undocumented students. Most studies focus on what DACA is about, but there is limited knowledge on how DACA positively and negatively has affected the academic, social, and emotional aspects of the lives of these students. We know that DACA promotes belonging, peer support, and greater adult responsibilities, but more research needs to be done on this topic to expand our knowledge.

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